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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000253

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/08/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: WHILE PM WAGHEF AND OTHERS LANGUISH IN PRISON,  
AZIZ SAYS THERE ARE NO POLITICAL PRISONERS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and  
(d).

[¶1.](#) (C) Summary: Despite General Aziz's repeated claims that there are no political prisoners in Mauritania, the selective targeting of prominent anti-coup individuals indicates otherwise. Four people, Prime Minister Waghef among them, remain in prison charged with corruption and mismanagement relating to the bankruptcy of Air Mauritanie. Though there may be an element of truth to some of the charges, there is little doubt that the detentions are selective and politically motivated. End summary.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) The accused: There are four individuals involved in the Air Mauritanie case. All of them are former directors of the now-defunct airline, and all of them are associated with President Abdallahi's government, to varying degrees. All four individuals rejected the August 2008 coup d'etat and participated in FNDD activities before they were arrested:

-- Prime Minister Yahya Ould Ahmed El Waghef: Waghef was arrested November 13, 2008, and has remained in prison ever since. Waghef was Director General of Air Mauritanie from 2004 to 2006.

-- Sidi Mohamed Ould Biye: Biye was arrested November 14, 2008, and has remained in prison ever since. Biye was President Abdallahi's economic advisor.

-- Moustapha Ould Hamoud: Hamoud was arrested November 14, 2008, and has remained in prison ever since. Hamoud was Minister of Public Service and Administration Modernization under both Waghef governments.

-- Isselmou Ould Khattri: Khattri was arrested November 14, 2008, and has remained in prison ever since. Khattri was the last director of Air Mauritanie, and was only in the position for two months before the government decided to liquidate the company.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) The accusations: The official charges against the four men in the Air Mauritanie case are for "embezzling public goods, using costly means to reschedule debt payments, camouflaging the company's financial situation, and malicious use of the company's name and funds to achieve personal gains."

[¶4.](#) (SBU) The accusations continued: Waghef faces additional charges relating to his administration of the Special Intervention Program. This program was intended to provide

relief to the populace in 2008 when prices of basic foodstuffs increased sharply. The case is known locally as the "rice affair," in reference to supposed corruption regarding the purchase of rice for the Special Intervention Program. The official charges in this case are for "using procedures contrary to the rules governing public procurement, embezzling public property, and treason through the disclosure of sensitive financial documents involving the state."

¶5. (SBU) Detainees' status: All four men remain in prison, and there is no indication that they will be released any time soon. Provisional liberty was offered to Waghef on the condition that he pay an extraordinarily high bail amount of 100 million ouguiyas (approximately \$380,000 US). Waghef has refused to pay, citing the high amount and his assertions that he has done nothing wrong. On March 18 Waghef's legal defense team filed a motion and held a press conference calling for his case to be transferred from the jurisdiction of common law to the Supreme Court in an attempt to move the case along. The motion was rejected, and his detention period was extended an extra four months. (Note: The four-month provisional detention period can only be renewed once. So in theory, Waghef will be eligible for release around July 14, 2009. End note.)

¶6. (SBU) The world according to Aziz: In an interview with the Al Arabiya satellite channel broadcast on March 31, Aziz was asked directly about prisoners who were against "the movement of August 6 (i.e., coup)" Aziz replied haltingly

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"this is not true... not true... not true." Struggling to find a justification for the arrests, all he could say was "some of those in prison support the change (i.e., coup)."

¶7. (C) Comment: Aziz's claims to the contrary, Post is unaware of any prominent coup supporters who are currently in prison because of alleged corruption or mismanagement. And while there may actually be something behind the charges of mismanagement and corruption -- few Mauritians in high government positions would be able to claim complete innocence, and Air Mauritanie clearly suffered from poor management -- it is clearly the window dressing used to keep political opponents out of the public arena. By threatening legal action and investigations into corruption, Aziz is able to keep opponents from voicing their opposition to him too loudly. Aziz undercut his own argument that the "FNDD Four" are non-political cases solely subject to law enforcement activities by including their release as one of the inducements for the FNDD during Muammar Qadhafi's failed mediation attempt. Under the guise of a strict "anti-corruption campaign," Aziz is so far targeting only opponents and threatening those who are wavering. End comment.

HANKINS